Boy's Quest for Clue to JFK Killing

David Lui was three years old when John F. Kennedy was shot in Dallas. As a student at Beverly Hills High School, Lui was intrigued by the event and began studying it. As he reran the famous Zapruder film he saw something that no one apparently had noticed before — a little girl chasing the presidential limousine who suddenly stops, startled. Was this in response to the sound of gunfire? If so, it could cause drastic rethinking of the various conspiracy versus lone gunman theories — because of the girl's position in relation to the reactions of the victims in the limousine. But who was this nameless, almost faceless child? This is the story of David Lui's search.

By David Lui
Special to The Chronicle

I watched the silent Zapruder film for what must have been the 50th time that night. Suddenly, I saw something that startled me: a young girl, running to keep pace with the presidential limousine, stopped abruptly and turned toward the Texas School Book Depository — before any shots were supposed to have been fired.

Many assassination investigators have said that the killing was a conspiracy — not because of the existence of a second gun, other bullets or witnesses who saw a second assassin, but because the shots were fired too close together, too quickly for that particular gun's mechanism to fire twice.

But if the first shot had been fired earlier than they thought, that would have left enough time for one assassin to have fired all the shots.

I was not an expert. I studied the Kennedy assassination for an extra credit project while I was a freshman at Beverly Hills High School. I became so engrossed with my study of the murder that I wrote to a mail-order house for a $15 video tape of the Zapruder film.

I can't calculate the number of hours I spent at nearby UCLA using their equipment to run the film over and over. I haunted the used book stores of Los Angeles, searching for any information on the assassination.

The Zapruder film has no sound. If it did there would be no difficulty in discovering exactly when the shots were fired.

I rolled the film again so I could take a closer look at the girl. She was about 10, wore a red skirt and a white top and was Caucasian.

I knew that there were many possibilities why a 10-year-old might stop running: maybe her parents called her back, she might simply have become tired, but just possibly she stopped running in reaction to a rifle shot.

I believed the theory that the president had been the victim of more than one assassin. The most common reason for concluding that Lee Harvey Oswald had not been the sole assassin in the plaza that day was some simple arithmetic applied to the Zapruder film.

I knew from my reading that Oswald's gun could fire only one bullet every 2.3 seconds. The FBI calculated that 18.3 frames of movie film passed through Zapruder's Bell and Howell camera every second. If the Zapruder film revealed a shot striking the car or its occupants more frequently than once every 42 frames (2.3 seconds multiplied by the camera's 18.3 frames per second) the assassination of the president must have been a conspiracy, since Oswald's gun could not have fired fast enough to do the job alone.

Unfortunately, Abraham Zapruder was not a professional cameraman. When he chose his position to film the parade, he did not realize that the limousine and its occupants would be obscured from his lens by a freeway sign. At frame 210, appearing to be unhurt, President Kennedy fell from view behind the sign. He emerged from the other side of the sign at frame 225 of the film with both hands to his throat, the effect of a bullet wound. The Warren Commission felt that it would not be possible to pinpoint the exact time of the first shot due to the interference of the sign. Therefore, it sufficed to say that President Kennedy was shot while he was obscured by the freeway sign.

At frame 238 of the film a shot hits Governor John Connally. The bullet pierced and collapsed his lung. Like a deflating balloon, the collapse forced the breath which the governor had just drawn back up his windpipe and out his mouth. This motion is seen starting at frame 241 of the film, just after his shoulder is thrust forward.

This being the case, I subtracted the frame in which President Kennedy was shot from the frame in which Connally was hit and found that 28 frames at most elapsed between the two shots (238-210 28). This was not enough time for Oswald's gun to be the sole firing weapon.

If, as shown, Connally was shot at frame 238, then the earlier shot would have to have hit the president not at frame 210, but before frame 196 for a lone assassin using Oswald's gun to have been responsible for both shots (238-425-196). With this in mind many people had surmised that the assassination was a conspiracy.

But the little girl stopped running at frame 197 of the Zapruder film. If she stopped running in reaction to a shot, that would mean that the first shot was fired much earlier than any researcher had assumed.

Of all the witnesses in the plaza that day, she was closest to the president when the first shot hit him. I knew that from her vantage point 15 feet behind the president, she was even close enough to see the bullet's impact.

If she had indeed stopped running in reaction to a shot it would have placed the time of the first shot, not at frames 210-255, as the Warren Commission had said, but before frame 196.

I knew that if I ever found the girl, and found out that she did stop running in reaction to a shot, I would have to change my theory from the conspiracy to single assassin.

* * *

EVERY DAY after school, I ran down to the city library to search through the 26 volumes of evidence collected by the Warren Commission, looking for some reference to the little girl. However, I wasn't able to find a sign that anyone had ever made reference to her, let alone interviewed her.

Later that week, I asked a friend to drive me to a store in another part of town. Suddenly, I had an insight into the assassination. I realized that this girl, a 10-year-old, was too young to go see a parade downtown by herself; someone probably drove her down to see the president that day, possibly a parent. That person might be listed among the known witnesses.

That week, I started to collect as complete a list as possible of the known witnesses. It was a gargantuan task. Only a small percentage of the total number of witnesses had actually been interviewed by the Warren Commission. Most had simply filed a deposition with the Dallas County Sheriff's Office on a one-page form.

Another group received only a fleeting reference in the commission files. Usually I saw, to my amazement, that the Warren Commission had made no attempt to locate a witness logged in this manner. I had no guarantee that the girl's parents were among the known witnesses, but I knew that it was my last chance to find her.

One of the major constraints on my research was lifted when I saw a complete set of the Warren Commission books selling at a Los Angeles swap meet. I closed my savings account, and bought the books for $125.

I followed every lead I could dig up that might help me in my search. When I completed my list, I had found about 300 potential parents.

I found tidbits of information about each and began to notice that some of the people in the plaza that day were less likely than others to be the parents or escorts of the little girl.

A major percentage of the total number of witnesses were city workers (the plaza in downtown Dallas where President Kennedy was killed was part of the civic center). The mayor of Dallas wanted to give the president as warm a welcome as possible, therefore, many city workers were given five or ten minutes off to go see the president pass by. I knew that few if any of them had time to go get their families. So I crossed them off my list.

Next, I eliminated all security personnel. No on-duty guard wanted to split his attention between protecting the president and watching his own kids. For this reason, I dropped all county deputies, city police, secret service, and firemen helping to control the crowd.

Since I felt that it was most likely that the girl's parents escorted her to the plaza that day, I cut from my list the names of all the witnesses who approximately ten years before were not of child-bearing age. The range of possibilities became smaller.

Because the little girl was white, I dropped all non-white witnesses from my list.

More than anything else, it was my dream to go to Dallas myself and question witnesses whose testimony was never taken by the Warren Commission.

My mother was leery. All my arguments and pleading were without success. I was not to go to Dallas. It was just too expensive a trip for a 15-year-old to take "on a wild goose chase." I had to prove to her that my trip was a serious venture which would pay off.

I cross-referenced my list to a current Dallas city phone book to find each witness' present address. Unfortunately, only half were listed. I used these addresses to send each person a letter requesting an interview.

As the responses came back, I showed my mother letter after letter of acceptance, 26 in all, which I had received over the course of two months. It had taken that time to wear her down, but she finally gave in with the provision that she join me in my journey, if only as an interested onlooker. I readily accepted on her terms.

Six days before Christmas in 1975, I flew to Dallas to try to uncover what millions of government dollars and endless man hours of research had failed to find.

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MY THREE-DAY TRIP to Dallas was a marathon run around town meeting with as many assassination eyewitnesses as possible, in the hope that one of them, just one, might know the little girl.

I interviewed witness after witness in my hotel as well as in their homes and offices. When I interviewed a witness at his office, that usually meant going to the assassination site because some people still worked where they did in 1963.

As I went from witness to witness, I would ask whether they personally knew Lee Harvey Oswald (for some had the opportunity to work with him in the Texas School Book Depository), how many shots they heard, and if they knew the little girl in the Zapruder film, of which I had still photos.

Every evening I'd sit for two hours trying to call those witnesses who never wrote back to me. I found that even though they did not take the time to write a letter back to me, some witnesses were more than willing to see me for a few moments. Even when they couldn't see me, I'd ask if they knew who the little girl was.

On the morning of my departure from Dallas I had two last interviews and then I would have to face it. My dreams of finding the little girl were fading fast. I consoled myself with the thought that I had recorded the eyewitness accounts of many who had never been questioned before.

Mom and I arrived at the home of my next-to-last witness. Once again I pointed to the stills of the little girl tracking the limousine, and asked Phil Willis, "Do you know this little girl?"

"That's my daughter, Rosemary," he answered.

I had found her at last. Her father, in fact both parents, had been on the plaza that day and had taken their daughter with them. Phil Willis had also taken his camera. He was responsible for some of the most important photographs of the assassination.

"Can I talk to Rosemary?" I asked, my heart pounding. He picked up the phone, dialed her number and handed me the receiver after a brief introduction.

I have to be careful not to lead my witness in any way, I thought, as I crossed the room to take the phone.

DAVID LUI: Rosemary, do you remember running

[illegible]

[illegible] "[illegible] name that"

[illegible] to [illegible] up with him.

[illegible] to ask the question which [illegible] to her, answered.

[illegible] "[illegible] running"

ROSEMARY, [illegible] when I heard the shot.

With this simple [illegible], the firing of the first shot was pushed back to a moment before the frame in which she had stopped running, before frame 198, thereby leaving enough time for a single assassin to have fired all the shots.

No longer could there be any doubt that the little girl had stopped running in reaction to a rifle shot. Her reaction, seen on the film, was the first visible reaction to the sound of the first shot and she had confirmed it as so.

It was apparent that the assassination did not have to be a conspiracy, simply because there was not enough time between the shots. All those who argued for conspiracy on this basis, including myself, would have to rethink their theories.

Los Angeles Times

Epilogue:

David Lifl's investigation and findings were brought to the attention of the House Select Committee on Assassinations and he was invited to present his findings to the committee in the fall of 1978. Lifl, at that time a freshman at Brown University, journeyed to Washington and presented his material to the committee staff.

At roughly the same time, two acoustical experts, Mark R. Weiss and Ernest Aschkenasy, were presenting testimony and evidence to the committee that gunshots originating a second gunman were audible on a dispatch tape of Dallas Police Department radio traffic on the day of the assassination.

The presentation of the acoustical evidence was persuasive enough for the committee to conclude that John F. Kennedy "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy."

David Lifl was never told how much weight was given his findings.

Dallas police department radio operations have continued to disavow the findings of the acoustical experts, including the military-[illegible] and [illegible] interceptions picked up the purported gunshot reports was exactly two miles away from the assassination scene.

Representative Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), chairman of the nine-member committee, is expected to call a press conference in late June or early July to release the committee's official report. The report is expected to be largely inconclusive, but to lean toward the conspiracy conclusion.

Rosemary Willis is now a Dallas schoolteacher. On June 8 she was to be married to Thomas Lynn Roach III. The couple plans to live in Amarillo.

David Lifl has never met her personally, and has never made any attempt to contact her since their brief phone call. The reason Lifl left at the time he finally located Rosemary in Dallas — and still feels — that any attempt to lead or prompt Rosemary's recollections of the events of the assassination would dilute her value as one of the most valuable witnesses to the event.

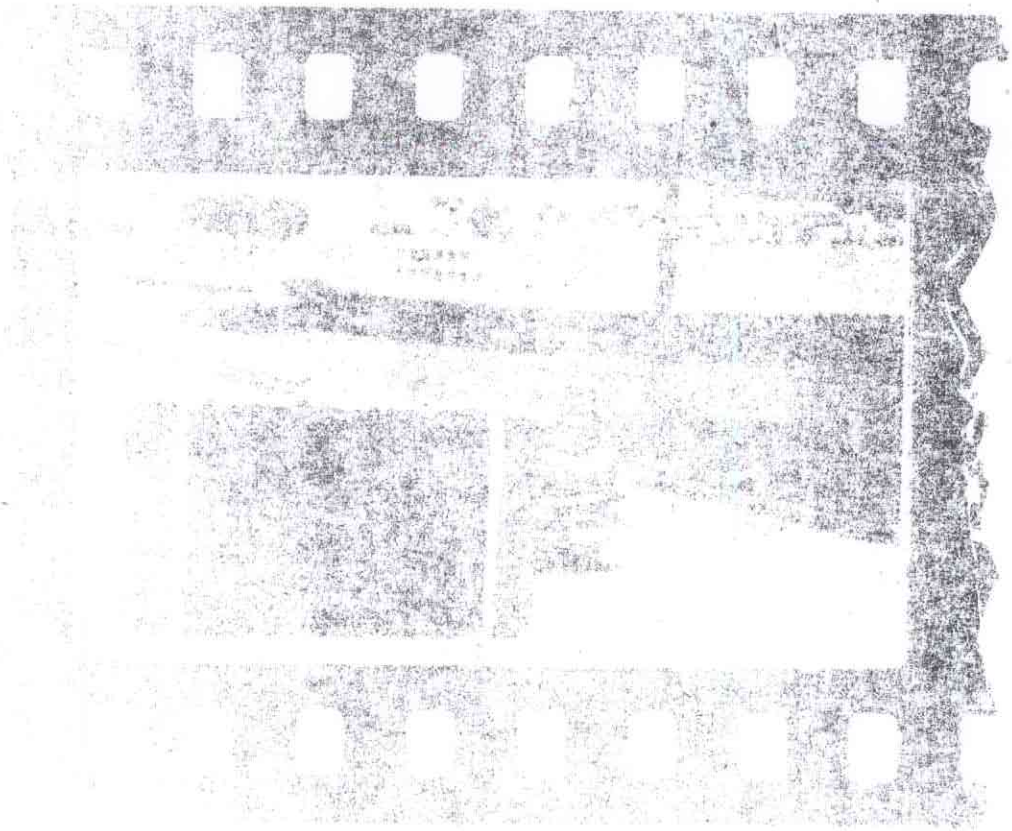
To date there have been no attempts by official investigators to interview her.

But in an interview Monday with United Press, Rosemary Willis described further what she saw and heard on Nov. 22, 1963.

"I heard three shots and they all came from across the street from the direction of the book depository," she said. "Oswald was up there as clear as could be. I think he was up there on purpose to make people think he was the one.

"I remember standing while everyone else was falling to the ground. And in my peripheral vision I saw three other figures standing. I saw a man with an open umbrella and beyond him a man behind a lattice type wall.

"And I saw either one or two people on the railroad trestle above. I glanced at the president again for a split second, then when I looked up, the umbrella was down and the man behind the wall had vanished."

"The shots I heard came from the book depository but they weren't necessarily the shots that killed him. Someone with a gun with a silencer could have been in the gutter where they later found shells, or on the railroad trestle or behind the wall."

Rosemary Willis of Dallas [illegible] to testify about the assassination